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ABSTRACT

This report presents a review of the literature on the best practices in distance education and the views of accreditation organizations on assessment of distance learning at institutions of higher education. To date there is a good deal of information about how to initiate distance learning courses and some case studies of individual courses at specific institutions, but there is little hard information about best practices or actual costs or profits of these courses. Some suggestions can be derived for creating a successful online community, and these center on prompt responses, profiles of participants, rules for a friendly environment, and providing information about specific discussion topics and the timing of discussions and presentations. A review of the policies of several major accreditation associations and professional groups suggests that a primary concern for evaluative bodies is that the distance education initiative be consistent with the mission and purposes of the institution with evaluative mechanisms in place to assure that programs and courses offered electronically have the same requirements and meet the same outcomes as traditionally offered courses. Accrediting agencies are also concerned with faculty training for distance education, learning resources, student services, and physical and financial resources. The commitment to distance learning goes beyond the effort to provide quality courses in a new environment to a demonstrated commitment to continuous improvement. (SLD)

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BEST PRACTICES AND ACCREDITATION ISSUES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Prepared for the

Teaching Learning Technology Roundtable

by

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May 2001

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This report addresses the best practices in distance education and the views of accreditation organizations on assessment of distance learning at institutions of higher education.

BEST PRACTICES

This portion of the report refers to distance learning that is either synchronous or asynchronous, but is not a hybrid course, i.e., teachers and students are not in the same place at any given time. It may involve the use of a combination of media, including television, videotapes, audiotapes, videoconferencing, audio conferencing, e-mail, telephone, fax, Internet, computer software, and print.

One of the problems encountered with this topic is that, to date, there are few systematic analytical studies of students who have experienced new technologies in higher education. There is a good deal of information about how to initiate distance learning courses, software that may be helpful, and case studies of individual courses at specific colleges/universities, but little hard information about best practices or actual costs/profits of these courses.

For example, John R. Bourne, Eric McMaster, Jennifer Rieger, and J. Olin Campbell of the Center for Innovation in Engineering Education, Vanderbilt University, in their article, Paradigms for On-Line Learning, August 1997, did examine student response to asynchronous on-line courses, finding that, in general, students liked the fundamental concept of learning anywhere and at anytime; however, a review of most courses currently on the Web reveal that many asynchronous on-line courses consist of little more than a syllabus and a list of assignments. In more developed on-line courses, they found that:

- Students procrastinated more than in non asynchronous learning courses;
- Students learned as much as in traditional courses;
- A majority of the students like asynchronous learning courses;
- Conferencing is important; encouraging peer-to-peer learning works;
- Students were not impressed by having encyclopedic knowledge at their fingertips; they simply wanted to know the information for which they were responsible; and
- The use of mentors worked well.

  Studies of this sort may be very useful in designing one's distance learning course, but does not really address the issue of best practices as determined by outcome assessments.

In a Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education (The Institute for Higher Education, April 1999), however, the following principles for good practices were specified to include those methods that:

- Encourage contacts between students and faculty;
- Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students;
- Use active learning techniques;
- Give prompt feedback
- Emphasize time-on task;
- Communicate high expectations, and
- Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Again, there was little in-depth study of whether these practices actually improved student learning.

Similarly, CUNY Online offers a guide to Best Practices in Distance Learning; however, it, too, does not indicate how it arrived at its conclusions. There are

no references to actual student experiences or outcomes. One of the key methods of engaging students online is to add a good deal of interactivity to the course. Common ways of adding interactivity that are unique to the online experience include:

- E-mail correspondence
- Short online quizzes with immediate individual feedback
- Online discussions
- Links to sites that encourage student inquiry and research
- Group projects that make use of E-mail and chat rooms
- Web pages created and posted by students
- Newsgroups
- Listservs

To create a vibrant online community, instructors should

- Promote continuity by answering E-mail promptly, asking open-ended questions in bulletin board discussions, and posting to discussions frequently.
- Define the purpose or objective of each discussion. This will help members stay on a specific topic.
- Make sure it is easy to identify participants. Create profiles of members that can be found on individual Web pages. Consider uploading pictures of students to help put faces and names together.
- Set rules to create a friendly environment. If you notice any harsh language, immediately send a private E-mail to the student who sent the inappropriate message.
- Invite experts to participate in chats and bulletin board discussions. Announce to students when the expert will be arriving online.
- Use a calendar to post start and end dates for specific discussions topics. If you have a scheduled chat event, post that as an announcement on the calendar.

- Make online discussions a part of the student's grade. This can substitute for the usual class participation portion of the grade. You may even consider that a certain number of postings each week are required per student.
- Encourage reflective thinking and ongoing discussions by avoiding questions that lead to right and wrong answers.
- Reply to student postings and prompt your students to go deeper than mere opinions or surface answers. Have students support their arguments with facts and supportive data when available.
- Bring the physical world into the virtual one. Use graphics, sound bytes and digital video to create a sense of place and to appeal to the diverse learning styles of your students. If possible, use Quick Time VR to create three-dimensional spaces that reflect real phenomena.

ACCREDITATION AND ASSESSMENT ISSUES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

All accredited institutions in the United States that are involved in distance learning initiatives need to be concerned about how their programs and courses will be viewed by accreditation organizations. These questions become more complex as institutions offer programs outside of their home regions and find themselves subject to the requirements of more than one body. Since virtually all accreditors require evidence of regular assessment processes these requirements should be well thought out when distance learning is contemplated rather than after it has begun.

A review of the policies of several major accreditation associations and professional groups, national, regional and specialized, yields similar results when issues of distance learning are concerned. The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education indicates that...

> Distance education is defined, for the purpose of accreditation review, as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, computer or other communications technologies.

Of primary concern to all of the evaluative bodies is that the distance education initiative be consistent with the mission and purposes of the institution. Additionally, there should be evaluative mechanisms to ensure that programs and courses offered electronically have the same requirements and meet the same learning outcomes and traditionally offered courses. The level of congruence among the various learning environments should be so great as to allow students to move easily from one environment to another.

Faculty

Of the accreditation bodies reviewed, all recognized that the role of faculty is changed when viewed in the context of distance learning. For most faculty, this requires significant training beyond the area of their academic expertise that is provided by the institution. The training must be coupled with an ongoing program of support services specifically related to teaching using an electronic system.

Several bodies noted that the introduction of new modes of instructional delivery require a rethinking of issues of such as preparation time, teaching load, class size, and contact hours. Policies related to faculty evaluation may need reconsideration to include teaching and scholarship related to electronic initiatives.

Library and Learning Resources

In general, the accreditation bodies sought programs that ensured that appropriate learning resources be available to students in distance learning programs. These resources should not only be available, but students should be required to use them in their development of information literacy. The resources in distance learning should parallel the resources for traditional campus students and include such support as tutoring, technical help lines, and research in addition to access to online databases.

Student Services

An effective distance learning program is one that provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, costs, and benefits the students may receive. Access to traditional services such as financial aid, academic advisement, placement and counseling should be available to this population. The accreditation organizations place the burden on the institution to assess whether the student has the background, knowledge and technical skills to succeed in the distance learning environment.

Physical and Financial Resources

Emphasis in this area centers on the previous assumption that a distance learning program is part of an institution's mission and therefore shares in the commitment to provide adequate funding to all initiatives. The institution must have both the equipment and technical expertise necessary to support a distance learning program. Access to laboratories, facilities and equipment must be provided to distance learners as appropriate. There should be a commitment to continuation of distance learning for a period of time sufficient for a student to complete a course or program.

Effectiveness and Outcomes

At the most basic level, institutions are required to provide for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at the completion of a program. However, most accrediting bodies go beyond that in requiring that measures of educational effectiveness including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction be collected. This information should be provided to students as well as within the institution. The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is very specific in requiring that:

> "... In the development of appropriate formative and summative outcomes measures, institutions should articulate expected student knowledge, skill, and competency levels for distance learning courses and programs; specify the extent and content of student/faculty and student/student lectures, discussions, analyses and collaborations for the selected instructional delivery mode; specify comparative distance learning and traditional course data on student completion and retention rates, and student and faculty evaluations, using data from other programs or institutions; and specify comparative electronically offered and traditional course data on student grade distributions, awards and honors, graduation rates, and employment, utilizing data from other programs or institutions.

The commitment to distance learning by an institution goes well beyond the efforts of the participants to provide quality courses in a new environment. In order for these efforts to be accepted, institutions must demonstrate their commitment to continuous improvement and excellence with concern for the same level of quality, integrity, and effectiveness that apply to campus-based instruction.